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Correcting the Eyesight: Cosmopolitanism in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*¹

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Abstract

The evolutionary process of separatist efforts such as colonialism, imperialism, globalization, neo-colonialism or any nationalism are outdated because global resources are becoming scarce every day, so such terms as human solidarity, Cosmopolitanism, and co-existence will have to endure in order to make use of the resources in the most optimum way. Mankind will have to understand that global sameness has to prevail despite long years of hostility, violence and bloodshed. In line with such an understanding, cosmopolitanism, as a term refers to world citizenship and 'a tolerance for things and people who are different' and 'morality which is not rooted locally, but globally.' Chinua Achebe tries to change the African images created by the writers depending on Eurocentric and Afrocentric perspectives. He handles the same periphery from an unusual viewpoint that is because he utilizes a different approach in representing Africa and composes counter discourses in response to colonial, imperial and racial discourses presented in colonial contexts.

Keywords: Africa, Cosmopolitanism, Eurocentric, Afrocentric, Igbo.

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African continent as a subject matter is a complex issue, since Africa and its blackness are created and recreated from the viewpoint of different cultural perspectives. The same Africa is transformed repeatedly into becoming something which is not itself, at all. When considered from this viewpoint, this study aims at depicting the true picture of Africa and blackness by consorting to the more objective viewpoint of *Cosmopolitanism* and contrasting it with *Afrocentrism* and *Eurocentrism*, both being opposite and rival viewpoints. Therefore, it is an effort to depict how one fact is distorted and when reality behind it is revealed by claiming a universal and credible perspective.

Justice in itself is an ambiguous word which can be manipulated or engineered by powerful interest or benefit groups. Therefore, the term justice should be equated with universal justice, which means the same justice for all. This can be achieved, according to the intellectuals of *Cosmopolitanism*, by considering, not ignoring, the so-called ‘other’ and accepting wholeheartedly that universal morality requires such an attitude which is, "a respect for the other, a tolerance for things and people who are different, the notion that morality is not rooted locally, but globally" (Jackman and Vavreck, 2015, p. 3). When tolerance comes to the foreground, it does not only get clearer as to why such an intellectual understanding as *Cosmopolitanism* is important in establishing a global community, but also how difficult it is. At the basis of *Cosmopolitanism*, a central motif reminds man of his humanity. Such a reminder is towards making all remember that they are human beings, having obligations to others, and they need to collaborate, respect their reciprocal rights of living as human beings while also understanding that the entire world is the only geography in which all have the right to survive on equal terms. This new attitude is not easy to be applied for all but at least. With continuous global effort and with more supporters of humanity, it can expand to a large global scale. It is inevitable to get prepared to understand global matters from the viewpoint of the others, so that empathy can be established for a better understanding. Gustavo Lins Ribeiro (2015) states, "People are different, the cosmopolitan knows, there is much to learn from our differences" (p. 19). The more experiences are shared and exchanged, the more tolerant one gets by getting more information about the details of other cultural practices.

Although *Cosmopolitanism* aims at creating one world with many peoples, this objective should not be confused with globalization. As Anthony Appiah refers to globalization, it is "a term that once referred to as a marketing strategy, and then came to designate a macroeconomic thesis, and now can seem to encompass everything, and nothing"

(2006, P. 13). In other words, globalism is a global unity in enjoying the productions of capitalist economy, against which only pockets of resistance are local cultures. Local cultures tend to reveal conservative life forms which defy globalization because they cling to their traditional and local values in order to survive. However, as globalization acquires more financial power, it crushes one by one every local culture, thus transforming them into becoming a component of its own machinery. It cannot create homogeneity either because local cultures resist it or because local culture uses its products again to practice their local cultural habits. Appiah clarifies it:

When people talk of the homogeneity produced by globalization, what they are talking about is this: the villagers will have radios; you will be able to get a discussion going about the World Cup in soccer, Muhammed Ali, Mike Tyson, and hip-hop; and you will probably be able to find a bottle of Guinness or Coca-Cola (as well as Star or Club, Ghana's own delicious lagers). Then again, the language on the radio won't be a world language, the soccer teams they know best will be Ghanaian, and what can you tell about someone's soul from the fact that she drinks Coca-Cola? These villages are connected with more places than they were a couple of centuries ago. Their homogeneity, though, is still the local king (2006, p. 102).

However, still, despite its growing hegemony and negative, inhuman impact, globalization is a reality, unlike Cosmopolitanism. Cosmopolitanism is no economic machinery, but rather a humane experience of living in togetherness. Moreover, it calls for an ultimately democratic system of sharing with others, respecting them and enjoying this attitude as much as one can since it reminds one of his own humanity, aspiring to "diminish suffering regardless of color, class, religion, sex, and tribe" (2006, p. 2).

According to Cosmopolitanists, transformation should be based on changing four different perceptions, as named by Mark Bracher (1969) in his *Educating for cosmopolitanism: Lessons from Cognitive Science and Literature*:

The basic types of knowledge include propositional knowledge (based in semantic memory), knowledge of particular instances and events (based in episodic memory, prototypes (generalizations or averages of these particular instances and events), any information-processing scripts (based in procedural memory). (p. 11)

Bracher's discussion on Cosmopolitan perspective considers that the human knowledge is the collection of the total sum of memories which have encoded meanings. These meanings are usually wrong because they are biased, so they need to be reconsidered so that what is right can be located in the human mind. Cosmopolitanism puts forward also the idea that any clash in the form of binary oppositions has to be eliminated in order to do away with misconceptions, misunderstandings and misreading. This idea might be seen as utopian, so Appiah highlights that "There's a sense in which Cosmopolitanism is the name not of the solution but of the challenge" (2006, p. xv).

The Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe tries to change the images created by the writers depending on Eurocentric and Afrocentric perspectives. He handles the same periphery from an unusual viewpoint that is because he utilizes a different approach in representing Africa and composes counter discourses in response to colonial, imperial and racial discourses presented in colonial contexts. Cosmopolitanism, while trying to eliminate binary oppositions in the evaluation of mankind, also tries to promote sameness among different ethnicities or peoples especially eliminating stereotyping. One example of Cosmopolitan attitude is Chinua Achebe whose main effort in *Things Fall Apart* is to portray whites and blacks as human beings, rather than prototypes or stereotypes. His effort is deductive rather than condemning or attacking the white prototypes.

Achebe works on normality in order to do away with the dehumanizing process of otherness. He tries to bring together both Europeans and Africans under the unifying concept of normality in order to eliminate hostilities and clashes between them (Bracher, 1969, p. 26).

In *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe accounts for and praises the ideals and dignity of the Igbo people as well as African cultural heritage in general. Not only does he refer to the strengths of Igbo society, but he also refers to the weaknesses of these people. The Igbo people genuinely appear as savages in some situations. This characterization is illustrated in *Things Fall Apart* through the protagonist, Okonkwo:

In Umuofia's latest war he was the first to bring home a human head. That was his fifth head; and he was not an old man yet. On great occasions such as the funeral of a village celebrity he drank his palm-wine from his first human head [...] Dazed with fear, Okonkwo drew his machete and cut him down. He was afraid of being thought weak. Okonkwo drew his machete and cut him down (Achebe, 1958, p. 10, 57).

While deconstructing the African images as uncivilized, portrayed by non-African writers, Chinua Achebe attempts to demonstrate the cultural roots of the Igbo society with its positive aspects, such as institutions, customs, and artistic activities which were lost after European colonization. He identifies the Igbo with

A series of standards which both Africans and Americans can seek as goals - a degree of distribution of wealth, a combining of male and female principles, compelling art and poetry and music, tolerance, democracy, morality, a sound system of justice and perhaps most important, the capacity for meaningful change. Lending veracity to his depiction of Igbo history by remaining clear sighted about cultural weaknesses which need correction, Achebe depicts a worthy pre-cursor of a healthy and just modern civilization (Rhoads, 1993, p. 70).

While narrating his story, Achebe presents an orderly and dynamic Igbo society in response to the portrayal of Africa as a dark place inhabited by backward, simple, and primitive people. Achebe puts considerable emphasis on the representation of Africans by African writers. He believes that they should relate their own experiences which they encountered during the colonial and imperial processes; otherwise these African experiences will continue to be utterly fictitious, unreliable and misrepresented (Chua, 1996, p.12). Achebe reveals an African culture with a government, a religious belief system, a monetary system, and a judicial system. He also relates an artistic tradition and philosophical depth of his people in his essay, "The Role of the Writer in a New Nation":

The Igbo had a philosophy of great depth and value and beauty that they had poetry and, above all, they had dignity. It is this dignity that African people all but lost during the colonial period, and it is this that they must now regain. (Rhoads, 1993, p. 61)

Some of the writers in once-colonized countries took the mission of writing in their native languages instead of a foreign language. However, Achebe suggested that the African writers should use English through which they could speak of African experience in a universal language. Achebe introduces his Igbo language to Africanize the English language by inserting metaphors, proverbs, local names, speech patterns and rhythms that make the novel an authentic African story. Because of this, John Chua brings forward that "introduction of new forms and language into a traditional (Western) narrative structure to communicate unique African experiences forever changed the definition of world literature" (Chua, 1996, p. 78).

Achebe's novel becomes an indicator of the possibility that blacks can be understood if ever whites penetrate into black Africa with humane intentions rather than with the evil motif to oppress, to disempower and to enslave, revealing imperial and colonial greed. The novel depicts the arrival of the white man at the Igbo village in Nigeria. With his first appearance, the white man appears as an alien to the geography and it is very likely that he may not survive there unless he understands the locals or the locals understand him and his intentions. The first comer, naturally, experiences a universal mischief when he is killed by the locals. Not only him, but his iron horse [motor bike] are aliens to the Igbo society and no one can be blamed for this first unfortunate encounter. It takes some time for people to understand each other. Understanding is a mutual effort. If the blacks, according to Achebe could express themselves, he believes the whites can understand them, the opposite of which is true as well. To that end, he says,

The nationalist movement in British West Africa after the Second World War brought about a mental revolution which began to reconcile us to ourselves. It suddenly seemed that we too might have a story to tell (Abdelrahman, 2005, p. 178).

Storytelling from the viewpoint of the Africans turns out to be a way of self-expression and articulation that encouraged a more human contact of the Africans with the whites. Achebe did not stop expressing Africans through his literary art, which he enriched with the productions of African culture. Fadwa Abdelrahman (2005) in his essay, "Said and Achebe: Writers at the Crossroads of Culture" declares that

The little Achebe had a fascination with his native culture as he used to attend local "heathen" festivals and to eat with his peers from the meals offered to the idol gods (against the will of his strict parents). Through these subversive practices, Achebe learnt a lot about the songs, dances, folk-tales, and other cultural elements that formed "the quiet education his hometown came slowly to embody for him" (p. 179).

As Achebe was reconciled with his own African identity by a continuous process of learning his own culture, he wanted the Europeans to follow the same route in understanding and appreciating Africa and Africans. He did not only work on understanding and reflecting his cultural products, but he also tried to train the European ear to hearing and eye to seeing African voices and African human forms. His auditory training embodies poems, tribal songs and individual expressions.

Moreover, he created expression that appealed to the western eyesight, such as vivid colors, human gestures, postures, impression in tribal and individual format. He ultimately tried to tune finely the European eyesight to see and the ear to hear that the other is another human being and to accept that they all could exist together under the umbrella of human civilization rather than various civilizations which are subjectively defined.

The drums in Okonkwo's village announce the oncoming crucial point when the encounter of civilizations will take place. Achebe uses the image of the drums in order to create sound imagery which appeals to the ears of the readers. The drums announce the presence of an African local culture, and their sounds echo over the geography. It is aimed to demonstrate the presence of the African culture to prevent misinterpretation of the white man, confusing it with his fears in a strange land. The fear resonates with the "evil forest" (Achebe, 1958, p. 88) in this novel, which, however, refers to a burial ground of those of Igbo people who died of incurable evil sicknesses. It is described in the novel:

Every clan and village had its "evil forest". In it were buried all those who died of the really evil diseases, like leprosy and smallpox. It was also the dumping ground for the potent fetishes of great medicine men when they died. An "evil forest" was, therefore, alive with sinister forces and powers of darkness (Achebe, 1958, p. 140).

Achebe believes that a new image, unlike the virtually constructed image of both Europeans and Africans has to be created in order to establish Cosmopolitanism with its principles all over the world.

The novel concentrates on Okonkwo and the District Commissioner as of being two ends of extremity. Okonkwo represents the traditional African identity which is the product of a complex system of theological, cultural and educational motifs which define Africa. His rigidity is his resistance to change. He wants to live as he used to live, with the values that have created him. District Commissioner, too, is the antithesis of Okonkwo. He wants to be as he is, unchanging, so applies force and uses negotiation tactics in order to change the Africans. This is the clash of civilizations. This wrong attitude ends in tragedy, which is inevitable. However, a character in the novel, Mr. Brown is much closer to Achebe's Cosmopolitanism when he establishes some dialogue with Akunna on religion: "neither of them succeeded in converting the other but they learnt more about their different beliefs" (Achebe, p.169). This approach is the first step of establishing reciprocal empathy. Mr. Brown knows well that "a frontal attack on it [religion of the clan] would not succeed" (Achebe, p.

170). To initiate a mutual understanding, Africans as well as Europeans are responsible in putting some effort. Only in this way, equality can be established. When concentrating on the story of Okonkwo, Achebe also tells the story of Africa with every bit of a detail that makes Africa a real and solid ground on which one culture and one people reside and live by many different beliefs and practices.

If there is lack of understanding, Cosmopolitanism cannot be established on “a proprietary humanity in intercultural common sense” (Korang, 2011, p. 2). If there is no empathy, there is no understanding which can establish common sense coexistence as in the case when the Christian church is burnt down in *Things Fall Apart* and Okeke talk about the White Man to the leaders and spirits of Umofia:

We cannot leave the matter in his hands because he does not understand our customs, just as we do not understand his. We say he is foolish because he does not know our ways, and perhaps he says we are foolish because we do not know his. Let him go away (Achebe, 1958, p. 180).

If there is no effort in understanding the other, the result is “a pile of earth and ashes” (Achebe, p. 180), the antithesis of Cosmopolitanism which is for universal construction of values through empathy and understanding. Cosmopolitanism, therefore, is for compromise rather than a war-like state. It offers a remaking of a new humanity in which different colors become more visible, different sounds can be heard more clearly, cultures in different geographies are tolerated from the viewpoint of diverse richnesses, a common language of understanding is established and man can act as a human being who respects “(realism and tragedy) as a necessary precondition of reaching the humanist ends” (Korang, 2011, p. 7).

Achebe’s effort is to represent Africa as a setting, like any setting, where any fortunate and unfortunate event may unfold. His Africa is a stage where a universal drama unfolds. His drama is not only the drama of Africa, but it is the drama of human experience. Achebe’s Cosmopolitan strategy, therefore, makes the black man visible and he refrains blacks from denying themselves.

Achebe, the existentially engaged and morally committed teacher, sees himself didactically guiding his African readers out of their imperially imposed amnesia and self-contempt, pointing the way to a new state of self-respect and cultural self-confidence (Korang, 2011, p. 9-10).

In *Things Fall Apart*, although he is a black missionary, he speaks out for restraint and he promotes verbal discourse of understanding. His presentation of Christianity is not war like but it is peaceful. Therefore,

Mr. Brown came to be respected even by the clan, because he trod softly on his faith. He made friends with some of the great men of the clan and one of his frequent visits to the neighboring villages; he had been presented with a carved elephant tusk which was a sign of dignity and rank (Achebe, 1958, p. 168).

Mr. Brown is not an African patriot, rather a Cosmopolitan patriot. He speaks out for establishing a mutual understanding with a soft tone, avoiding struggle for superiority. He is like Appiah's father who said, 'Deep inside of me [...] Is a great love for mankind and an abiding desire to see mankind, under God, fulfill its highest destiny' (Appiah, 1997, p. 618). Even though Mr. Brown may not stand for a perfect Cosmopolitan, he reflects the three required characteristics of a Cosmopolitan, which are dialogue, tolerance, and making conversation. According to Appiah, "Of course, such dialogue is not without its difficulties, but we can and must learn how to speak to one another in contexts of deep diversity [...] (against) cultural separatism and its inevitable clash of civilizations" (1997, p. 129-147).

Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* becomes a deconstructionist approach to create a new understanding of the setting on a specific geography. This approach begins with the title of the novel: *Things Fall Apart*. Here, with the title, the intention of Achebe is to deconstruct everything that has been created in the name of Eurocentrism and Afrocentrism, both of which have references to specific continents, their geographies and their settings. In order to deconstruct the setting, he offers an African myth of the tortoise which stands for 'all of you'. He likens the entire global geography to the shell of a tortoise which seems to have been divided in terms of borders which define different boundaries. In fact, he is talking about one significant shell on which all can coexist in harmony with each other. He refers to the universal togetherness of people on the entire earth being the new cosmos where differences complete the integrity of the shell. It is like a tortoise, the new cosmos which can be established at any place as long as the tortoise walks.

As a consequence, Eurocentrism offers blurred images of black African and Afrocentrism offers a poor vision of actual, current Africa by escaping into the ghosts of the African past just like Euro centrists relied on Greek and Roman myths. Neither of the perspectives has been able to offer a clear and reliable vision of Europe and Africa.

Neither the European eye nor the African eye has been able to offer an objective perception of universal human experience. The reason behind this is that both references, which are with euro- and afro- prefixes, refer to definite geographies suggested by two distinct continents. The paper, as it has aimed, has proved that Cosmopolitanism, although it is another ideology, is the reliable lens that could correct both European and African eye disorders. Cosmo- is a term which does not refer to certain geography. It is a term which stands for the cosmos that defies and rejects any particular geographical setting. The Cosmopolitan lens depicts racial, sexual and cultural differences as they are, as a suggestion of richness in difference. Cosmopolitanism, therefore, is the remedy for the poor eyesight and it offers absolute correction of any poor vision. To this end, he offers his new cosmic lens as a way to see people as they are, neither as subjects nor as the objects of the common experience. Achebe's subjects are both whites and blacks in Umofia and they both suffer from intolerance which results in even murder from both sides. His effort is to make the reader see that in his cosmic land, there is no one superior, or inferior, no inequalities, but there is prevailing empathy and tolerance. The new culture he offers is not the product of a specific landscape or geography. It goes beyond the limitations of geographical territories. It is a conceptual landscape in which the human mind is relieved of tensions between binary opposites. In such a landscape, as it is also suggested in *Things Fall Apart*, people are not expected to convert each other but to understand more about each other and their beliefs. By this way, the universal mind is expected to be established.

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